

Keeping schools open: education in conflict

Alice Farmer

Although some non-state armed groups protect and promote education, many others neglect it or even attack schools and students.

Conflict does not suspend the right to education, and non-state armed groups (NSAGs) have a duty to protect education in areas they control. Humanitarian law mandates the continuance of education in emergencies; the Fourth Geneva Convention, for example, obliges occupying powers to facilitate the “proper working of educational institutions in occupied territories”, and emphasises that for certain children affected by conflict “parties to the conflict must ensure [that] their education [is] facilitated in all circumstances.”¹ Education is a crucial factor in normalising the lives of children affected by conflict and providing skills with which to survive and thrive.²

Where populations have been displaced by conflict with NSAGs, the relevant authorities – whether the NSAG now in charge of

territory, or the state maintaining territorial control – are required to provide education as soon as possible. In the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Article 23(1) stresses that educational facilities “shall be made available to internally displaced persons... as soon as conditions permit.”

More than half of the children who are currently out of school are in conflict-affected or fragile states. Given that modern conflicts are frequently internal armed conflicts, many of these states have NSAGs operational in their territory, and these groups can have a significant impact on access to education. While that impact can be extremely destructive, as with attacks on school, for example, it is not always uniformly negative. Education is one area in which NSAGs can have clear incentives to

fulfill basic rights – particularly for NSAGs with political agendas and some degree of territorial control.

NSAGs without territorial control

Internal armed conflicts involving NSAGs have a high impact on education through mass forced displacement (a factor which interrupts education through discontinuity of schooling, impoverishment of families, and increased insecurity for facilities and teaching staff); destruction of educational infrastructure (both human and physical); and impeding humanitarian access (including the provision of emergency education programming).

NSAG attacks on education can include not only physical attacks on schools but also abductions from class to join armed groups, and threats to students, teachers and administrators. In the Swat district of Pakistan, for example, NSAG attacks on schools were



IDP camp established in a school, District of Dir, North West Frontier Province, Pakistan.

prevalent in the years leading up to the recent displacement crisis, with more than 200 schools destroyed in that district alone by the end of 2008, of which 95% were girls' schools. An estimated 50,000 students were deprived of education as a consequence. And a Save the Children UK survey of a school in Kandahar, Afghanistan, found that "only about half of the girls attend school daily due to on-going threats on their lives."³ Attacks on schools or other facilities ordinarily used by children are prohibited by international law – yet they continue.

Fighting between NSAGs and others to control territory can have a drastic impact on access to education for displaced persons and others. For example, Save the

Children UK estimates that the majority of displaced children in eastern DRC have had no access to formal or informal education since 1998.⁴ NSAGs in DRC have further exacerbated access to education by impeding humanitarian access and destroying educational infrastructure. They often burn school furniture for firewood, and occupy schools.

NSAGs with some territorial control

Where NSAGs have some territorial control, they may be able to provide some kinds of social and economic services to the local population. For instance, Hezbollah is both an NSAG and a political player in Lebanon with control over a large number of municipalities in southern Lebanon. Hezbollah maintains

an Education Unit as part of their organised system of health and social services; according to a June 2009 report, the Education Unit "provides [an] indispensable service to the Shi'ite poor" by operating a number of primary and secondary schools serving approximately 14,000 principally Shi'ite students at low fees in areas where Lebanon's public school system is considered to be of poor quality.⁵ Here, the presence of an NSAG providing some degree of territorial control and social services has a positive impact on access to education, both for displaced and non-displaced children.

However, such a pattern is not always true when a NSAG controls territory; NSAGs can erode security to the point where education is impossible and/or completely neglected. In Afghanistan's Jawzjan Province, for example, the central government has largely neglected state services, and much of the area is affected by NSAG violence. Children face serious obstacles in attending the few schools that do exist – obstacles that include Taliban-laid landmines, and kidnappings en route to and from school. Here, the NSAGs are neither providing sufficient security to permit education to continue nor political support for education itself.

NSAGs have, as a minimum, an obligation not to attack education, and often, where they have some level of territorial control, have a positive obligation to provide access to education. It is clearly necessary, therefore, to engage NSAGs in issues of education, and to recognise the role they can play in damaging or promoting children's rights.

Alice Farmer (alice.farmer@nrc.ch) is Child Rights Advisor with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre/ Norwegian Refugee Council (<http://www.internal-displacement.org>).

1. Articles 50(1) and 24(1)

2. Graca Machel, *The Impact of War on Children*, 2001. http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_4401.html

3. Save the Children UK, *Barriers to Accessing Education in Conflict-Affected Fragile States, Case study: Afghanistan*, p 27 http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/docs/Afghanistan_Case_study_Final.pdf

4. Save the Children UK, *Barriers to Accessing Education in Conflict-Affected Fragile States, Case study: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)*, p18 http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/docs/DRC_Case_Study_Final.pdf

5. Middle East Policy Center, *Hezbollah's Social Jihad: Nonprofits as Resistance Organizations*, June 2009. <http://tinyurl.com/MEPC-Hezbollah-June09>